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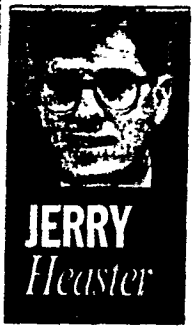
K.C. Star

Sinister smoke? Prove it

Not much has been made of it, but the Congressional Research Service recently issued the most serious challenge yet to the controversial Environmental Protection Agency report labeling secondhand tobacco smoke a carcinogenic killer.



It's unfortunate the media haven't done more with this latest development in the smoking battle because the dispute goes well beyond individual biases concerning tobacco use.

The issue of so-called environmental tobacco smoke should be considered as much an economic issue as a health issue until the EPA can offer convincing substantiation of its claim that secondhand smoke causes thousands of lung cancer deaths a year among nonsmokers.

The Congressional Research Service will render the EPA report's credibility even more fragile than it already is if its findings ever get a widespread public airing. So far, though, it has been largely ignored by everyone except those with a substantial economic stake in less government intrusion.

One such aspect involves the regulatory response that followed the EPA report. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration proposed more stringent indoor workplace air quality standards, based significantly on the EPA's claims.

While those regulatory initiatives are predicted to cost the businesses involved billions of dollars, critics say the EPA's questionable methodology fails to justify imposing this massive cost on society.

While the congressional research arm doesn't recommend policy responses as part of its work, its critique should be a serious problem for anti-smoking forces because it's from a government source perceived as neutral. Past criticisms of the EPA report have usually been dismissed as work done either directly or indirectly under the auspices of the tobacco industry.

The research service's most damaging contention is that "very few or even no deaths" can be attributed to secondhand smoke. It also faulted OSHA for being too selective in the studies it used in assessing workplace risk. If OSHA had taken into account all the studies available, it said, it couldn't have justified its proposals based on increased risk of lung cancer. Similar criticisms have been made of the EPA study, which critics say was rigged to support the agenda of anti-smokers.

Since the Congressional Research Service completed its 20-month review and made it public, organizations as varied as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; the National Restaurant Association; and the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers International Union have tried to generate interest in revisiting regulatory initiatives based on what they contend are the highly doubtful dangers of passive smoking.

Sen. Wendell Ford of Kentucky has asked OSHA to reopen hearings on proposed workplace rules involving secondhand smoke. Rep. Scotty Baesler of Kentucky has gone further by urging that proposals to ban smoking in the workplace be dropped altogether.

Thus far, however, the movement to discredit the EPA report and defuse the issue has failed to gain any traction. And given tobacco's growing role as a pariah in U.S. society, advocates for a fair hearing on this issue probably are fighting a losing battle.

This also is an economics-driven prospect, because the ultimate aim of many is a litigation bonanza from health-based damage claims against the industry.

Jerry Heaster's column appears Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. To share a comment, call **816/889-7827** *and enter* **2301**. *Send e-mail, including a telephone number, to* **heastej@kcstarnet.com**.

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